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C O N F I D E N T I A L BRATISLAVA 000544

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NSC FOR DAMON WILSON

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/05/2011

TAGS: PREL MOPS MARR I2 LO

SUBJECT: NEW GOVERNMENT WANTS ORDERED, GRADUAL WITHDRAWAL
FROM IRAQ, CONSULTATIONS WITH U.S. AND IRAQ

Classified By: Ambassador Rodolphe M. Vallee, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (U) This is an action request -- please see para 5.

¶2. (C) As Department is aware, following up on his campaign promise, just-installed PM Robert Fico has told the press that his government would initiate a phased withdrawal of Slovak troops from Iraq. As we did after Fico's surprise campaign announcement in early June, we have told Smer party officials that now is not the time for Slovak troops to leave -- especially as Iraqis are making progress politically and the coalition is working to increase Iraqi civilian and military capacity. We also sent the message to Fico that no decision should be taken without consultations with the U.S., the coalition, and the Iraqis. Slovakia's new Foreign Minister, Jan Kubis, reiterated July 4 that a withdrawal would be phased and would be decided only after coordination "with the U.S. and other partners... so that we do not cause problems." Kubis added that Slovakia wanted to do this "in a way so that our allies remain satisfied with our collaboration (informal Embassy translation)." New Defense Minister Frantisek Kasicky promised an "elegant" solution, stressing that no date had been set to begin the withdrawal and that the matter would be "the subject of diplomatic discussions and consultations with military experts." Smer Vice-Chair and new Speaker of Parliament Pavol Paska had told us July 1 that Fico and the government wanted to meet with us early to discuss the issue. Ambassador has a request in to Fico for the earliest possible courtesy call, at which this will be discussed. When we meet, we will press the case for maintaining the presence in Iraq, but we expect the government to insist on a phased withdrawal to meet its political promises. In that event we will make the case, as we have done in the past, for increased Slovak training of Iraqis -- in Iraq and, if necessary, in the region -- as well as other ways for Slovakia to assist Iraqi security and political progress. Paska had told us earlier that continued or increased training would be part of any Slovak withdrawal plan.

¶3. (C) We expect the SDKU party of former PM Mikulas Dzurinda to oppose a withdrawal in parliament, and we think SDKU and perhaps Bela Bugar's Hungarian Coalition Party (SMK) will focus on trying to make a withdrawal as gradual and transparent as possible. Former FM Eduard Kukan said publicly that a withdrawal is possible, but that the matter needed to be discussed extensively. We will be in touch with the opposition as we make the case to Smer. Within Fico's coalition, the ultra-nationalist SNS fully supports a withdrawal, with SNS Chairman Jan Slota typically going way beyond the pale to describe the Slovak troops in Iraq as "clowning around." Kukan immediately blasted Slota for disparaging Slovakia's armed forces while trying to claim he

(Slota) is a true Slovak patriot. Fico's other coalition partner HZDS opposed the decision to withdraw during coalition talks, and Meciar said in public statements that he disagreed with the withdrawal. HZDS has neither the clout nor, we think, the intention of fighting hard over the issue, although we will press them on this. HZDS's main preoccupation is trying to gain U.S. acceptance by contending it supports many of our policies.

¶4. (C) Ambassador took the initiative July 4 to brief the Iraqi Ambassador resident in Vienna, who covers Slovakia, on the Fico government's intentions. Ambassador suggested that the Iraqi Ambassador come to Bratislava early-on to make the case to the Slovak government to keep forces in Iraq. The Iraqi Ambassador said he would need to get instructions from Baghdad, but would recommend to his bosses that he be authorized to do so.

¶5. (C) Action request: We will continue to make the case against withdrawal of the demining unit, and would appreciate a forthright, up-to-date assessment of the unit's continued utility in Iraq. We also request Department's input on alternative military or civilian mechanisms of assistance that Slovakia could provide to Iraq, should departure of the mine clearers come to pass.

VALLEE